A REVIEW OF FORMS AND FUNCTIONS OF IGBO TEXTILE SCULPTURE

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ABSTRACT

The free experimentation on and out of loom with the mastery of other textile techniques and materials gradually onwards click to the expression of abstract artistic concepts. Artists, from both Textile and Fine art, found fiber, thread and textile based constructions the most or perhaps the only satisfactory medium of self-expression which gigantic size, flat or in the round, referred to as textile or soft sculpture. Most likely this art broke out from traditional arts as it is practiced in globally. In Nigeria, the art practices also followed the trend in which the Igbos played a part. This study traces the existence of textile sculpture in the traditional art of the Igbos and in which form they can be found. Historical analysis of product development was employed. It was discovered that masks and masquerades, scarecrows, ritual objects and festive regalia are aligned to Textile Sculpture as they are all created with fabrics and textile related materials.

INTRODUCTION

The history of textiles has always been the history of weaving, tie and dye, applique, batik, Macramé and print-making. All these aspects of textiles provide two dimensional effects, except macramé which shows a feeling of art in the round. From which it is believed that textile sculpture emerged. This according to Waller (1977), is a free experimentation to produce abstract statement in materials, texture, and structure. She further refers to the earliest of this processes as pictorial tapestry, which is still two dimensional. Historically, the artists involved in this two dimensional art forms (textile and fine art) could no longer contain the restrictions of two dimensional arts and broke into the free standing works, which may either be gigantic or small. These supposed two dimensional works turned into a free standing or three dimensional when they are out of loom, they become an embodiment of a three dimensional objects hence "Sculptural".

The inspiration to produce art forms with found fibers, yarns, and natural materials like feathers quills and furs has always been satisfying to man. These items are the yielding vehicles to embody his feelings about the spiritual and the eternal as well as the means of his physical comfort and protection. During the middle ages in Europe, great tapestries was a very popular textile craft when Christian concept and the scenes of daily lives were expressed in vigorous and glowing magnificence in wools a very wild contrast to painting. In England, the great exhibition of 1851, the period of industrial revolution, provoked protest from artists due to the total disregard for the basic and inherent qualities of materials coupled with the love for quantity rather than quality. The ugly situation forced the artists and craftsmen to re-acquaint themselves with the basic characteristic of methods and materials and their first exhibition was held 1881 (Waller, 1977).

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The first woven tapestry was painterly pictorial. But artists and craftsmen's interest moved away from the loom to assume out of loom stance where abstract statements took over with materials like cellophane and rayon. Activities turned to exploration with completely new materials and this trend continued into the world of technology. Works of Magdalena Abakanowicz, Olga de Amaral, Jagoda Buic and Ritzi and Peter Jacobi are few artists who weave directly with their fingers to create monumental and overwhelming imaginative free standing structures (Waller, 1977).

Kamenitsas, (2020), stated that the different innovations that have emerged throughout history have modified and modelled our culture, our beliefs and our lifestyle. Throughout history, creativity or innovativeness usually owe much to our predecessors' achievements. The transition of knowledge to the next generation allows human culture to keep on evolving without having to start from the scratch. Nigeria's experience in the evolvements of the creative traditional arts and craft in the areas of weaving, cloth dyeing calabash caving, gold and bronze smiting, soft and hard sculpture etc cannot be under estimated where fabric and other textile related materials alongside with found objects have been used in creating formidable works of arts.

In Igboland, earlier before this period, Textile materials has been in use as was proved by Shaw's excavation in 1959. The typical Igbo adult wore loin cloth - a pair of hand woven fabric worn around the hip and covering the genitals. Females wore short wrappers- also hand woven – or simply waist beads as against the voluminous gowns or wrappers which are characteristic of Igbo every day dressing of today. . Isichie believes that the earliest description of Igbo land was of the items brought by the Europeans of which textiles was one, as was documented by Pereira in 1505 – 1508 (Isichei in Cole and Aniako, 1984).

The proof of the earliest use of textiles in Igboland also suggests or shows that textile is as old as Igbo race. Further investigations from Cole and Aniako, (1984), Afigbo and Okeke, (1985), show that they are several weaving centers in Igboland among which are Nsukka, Asaba, Akwete, and the southern Igbo zone of Rivers and Cross River areas. It is further stated that the Nsukka women weave open works of white fabrics called “ikpoto”, which are used largely for ritual purposes, sacrifice and masking costume for Odo and Omabe spirits (Cole and Aniakor, 1984). Also this proof is an indication that Textile Sculpture is as old as Igbo tradition. This is so because the masking costume has, when in use for masquerading, becomes an embodiment for the spirits that assume the body. Another cloth produced by the Igbo people is Ukara cloth. The cloth is mainly used for “Ekpe” masking tradition. 'Ekpe cloth is an important feature of the secret men's society among the Cross River Igbo and other nearby tribes who have Ekpe as a central institution. The ukara cloth is most striking and symbol laden fabric. It is a stitch – and - dye indigo cloth which is normally used to raise a gigantic sculptural Ekpe house during the funeral of an Ekpe member.

Masquerading is not only a means of creating textile sculpture in Igboland, Textile sculpture is also celebrated in Scarecrows erected in various farms to act as chauffeur on the crops to drive away birds and warn trespassers. Also in some shrines, fabrics or textile constructions are used in conjunction with any other objects to raise images as ancestral representations. Textile sculpture is not only celebrated in masquerades, shrine objects or scarecrows, but also in prestigious apparels used during social events and festivals in form of adornment or embellishment of the objects of embodiment. Cole and Aniako (1984) noted that while Asaba fabrics are mainly used locally, Akwete cloths of eighteenth century or perhaps earlier were the most celebrated of Igbo weavers which were used both for prestige and ritual purposes.

It was also reported that in 1954, Baikie, positively identified weaving in Igala land. Also, by 1903, western Igbo cloth of Asaba was described as "beautiful" by some people (Denis in Isichie in Cole and Aniakor, 1984). Further researches and investigations on Igbo Philosophy, religious and cosmological documents proved that all these practices are as early as the Igbo race, which on the other hand claims the existence of Igbo textile sculpture for as long as they are on the face of the universe.

Igbo Textile Sculpture and Their Forms

Textile sculpture aims at textile forms executed in sculptural forms using tactile or textile based materials as medium. Encyclopedia Britannica (2021) states that Igbo masks are a combination of wood and fabrics, employed in a variety of drama. The combination presented a framework for textile sculpture. Waller described this association as the marriage of fiber and dimensionality. Thus, all textile forms so executed are concerned with the organization of masses and volumes. Therefore, in this way, textile sculpture, no matter its textile material, is to occupy real space and in other words, compel belief in its claim to be alive as sculptural. The merging of volumes and tactile effects of sculpture and textile respectively is a dynamic expressive medium, which the Igbos has earlier explored that resulted in the creation of masking tradition, scarecrows, ritual objects and prestigious apparels. The development of weaving in certain areas of Igbo community encouraged the development of textile sculpture consciously or unconsciously. The works produced with fiber, threads and unconventional textile materials are referred to as textile Sculpture. This is as a result of conscious and unconscious explorations done by creative artists of older generations in order to create a new form of entertainment to boast their egos and prowess like the "ijele" (Plate 1) and "wonder" (Plate 8) masquerades. These are good examples of Igbo textile sculpture in all aspects.

Textile by definition is described as materials that can be or have been formed with yarns and fabricated into cloth. The production of these yarns and fabricated cloths can involve one or a combination of the processes of textile construction which includes interlacing method of weaving, interloping method of knitting, knotting, braiding, felting, bonding, or lamination. Textile is mainly concerned with fabrics and the materials from which they were made. Sculpture o the other hand is generally described as the art of creating three dimensional arts. According to chambers encyclopedia, (1983, vol. 12) it is an applied term to work in a wide range of materials differing greatly I scale, intention, and in treatment. This therefore, encourages creative work in sculpture which are developed using wide range of materials and media in which textile-based constructions are inclusive as well as any other found object that can be woven, assembled or built-up into sculptural form. Textile sculpture is therefore a medium of fiber thread and textile construction through which objects of sculptural forms are achieved by weaving, assembling and building-up creating oms using flexible materials available in the environment. This definition forms the locus on which to confirm the claim that textile sculpture has been an existing practice within the Igbo community.

Textile Sculpture in Igbo Mask and Masking Tradition

The Igbo, in their zeal to produce several and various masquerades to exhibit superiority and personal aggrandizement in their communities or society, make use of textile materials like raffia, grass, animal skin (leather) and other items like feathers and found objects to decorate

or infuse elaborately onto their masks or masquerades. In some cases, the tactile materials are lavishly used to decorate masks. For instance, the Ezzamgbo mask (plate 5) was created out of leather and fiber which were used to decorate the entire leather mask. This was achieved with natural fibers and hand woven fabrics produced by women with local looms. Sometimes this fiber and fabrics are incorporated into woods for mask production. Most often, the materials are either woven, knitted, appliqued, knotted, oe looped into head masks or costume-types for masquerades. Equally, the masquerade costume may be woven in the process of either looping, knotting or appliqued in a full human size using jute fiber, nylon cord raffia, and fabrics of assorted colours to create colourful costumes like Ijele, Adama, and wonder masquerades' costumes. These masquerades exhibit, to an extent the degree of the belief in the returning fathers or the incarnate which forms the bases of Igbo masking tradition. Fine fabric costumes form the entire masquerade. In some other occasions feathers are introduced on the masks especially during ritual preparations of the mask, costume, weavers and environment to ensure the success of their outing (Cole and Aniakor, 1984).

More so, some of these masquerade costumes depict a lot of conglomeration of cloths with seed pods or metal buttons attachments, and sometimes modification of assemblage with feathers, quills and animal skin. For instance, the Awka "Mgbedike" (the time of the brave, Plate 6) masquerade exemplify this view. The costume was embellished using quill stud. The Mgbedike masking spirit is a personification of strength, bravery, and virility as such, the costume comprises visual aura and sometimes olfactory materials composed for maximum impact.

Again the Igbo Maiden spirits, which are of many types, draw upon the idea of physical beauty as against the 'Mgbedike"s ugly appearance. The costume is mainly made of colourful fibers and cloth construction to which relatively small face mask is attached. Some are a configuration of aesthetic appeal starting from the head load or the mask superstructures, which is of wood, decorated with multitude of colourful fibers and fabrics down to the stocking - covered toes (Plate 7). The median mask of the north central Igbo area (Awka, Agukwu, Nri etc) has wood, pigments with beads and fibers elaborately and luxuriously infused in it giving it an orchestrate of glorious beauty. According to Cole and Aniakor (1984), the Igbo Locust spirits that invade villages during the dry season festivals also depict a conglomeration of textile sculpture. Ulaga and Ogolo represents the numerous masquerades of this season. These masquerade show a complete framework with appliqued or raffia covered faces and multicolored cloth-strip "bodies". The visual impressions of these masks are dynamic. Some appear clothed in suits of locally woven cloth with a feathery bundle of raffia on the upper body, while some appear covered in a bright patchwork suit with a long conical cloth head (Ogolo, plate 4) found in North Central Igbo area. Some of the locust masks have woven raffia elaborately infused into the mask with fringed panel fibers that drape and terminate in long strand showing an assemblage of textile construction.

The idea of textile sculpture is further expressed in the Odo, Omabe, and Ijele masking tradition of the Northern (Nsukka, Igala etc) and North Central Igbo respectively. The Omabe masks are embellished with suits of locally woven cloths on to which hundreds of shinny imported chrome buttons are attached to adorn the costume giving it a luscious form. A piece of

leopard skin encircles their waists and hung down behind like a tail. The masks are mainly clothed with red and white feathers projecting from the head, giving a compete framework. While some appear in this framework, others wear complete appliqued cloth costume with an enormous crown of feathers projecting outwards several feet. Odo masks are woven baskets worked with cloths or raffia costume. Furthermore, an orchestrate of sculptural textile is expressed in Ijele masquerade. This masquerade is a positive aggrandizement of the producers from Anambra areas of Agulueri, Nteje, Achalla etc. Ijele is known to be the largest mask in tropical Africa. It is about five and a half meters high and two and a half meters wide. Because of its huge size, it is referred to as the elephant among the spirit creatures (Cole and Aniakor, 1984). But as a textile sculpture, Ijele is an architectural edifice. It is made up of the towering colourful top superstructures and appliqued fabric costume, which is crafted, sewn, tied and or glued, then assembled in a large framework springing from wooden disc. Hundreds of tassels are made to stick out of the arches and hanging around the base of the disc producing dazzles and glitters. Many mirrors and dozens of human and animal figures which are straw-filled and appliqued, were used to adorn the whole structure. The complete assemblage, in addition to the above, also includes a long python encircling the base, and bright appliqued panels.

The spectacle of this multi-structural framework is alive and spectacular. Its dance Vibrates the dazzle of colours and flashing mirrors as it sways in slow motion. The Ijele masquerade has been described by Okafor (1992) as the universe in motion, the father of all masquerades, a summation of Igbo cosmology, representing all that the Igbo man knows and an assemble of dignity, majesty, beauty and preternatural excellence. The aesthetic qualities of Ijele figure and colours were expressed by many who also recognized that Ijele is a symbol loaded with meanings and teachings of various lessons embodied in the Igbo believe system.

The above, to mention but a few, are examples of Igbo edifice that can be associated to sculptural textile due to the conscious incorporation of textile fabrics and other tactile materials of textiles in its formation or creation in an attempt to invigorate the cultures and traditions of the people and also an avenue to maintain and sanitize the social norms and traditions.

Scarecrows as Form of Textile Sculpture

Another manifestation as textile sculpture is in scarecrows usually seen in farmlands (pates 9 &10). Scarecrow is an inanimate human object set up in the farm land to frighten and drive crows and other birds away from crops. They are objects wrapped in cloths cellophane and empty cans and other varied colourful materials dropping downwards. The objects may be an assemblage of junks such as guards, empty cans, bottles of all forms and sizes, plastic materials, metal pans, rods etc which are covered with colourful materials or cellophanes. These objects are mounted in farms or on the roads or in prohibited areas to serve as warning signal or limitation of freedom. The materials for erecting scarecrows may be organic or inorganic. Among these are textiles such as a pair of trousers, singlet, blouses, skirts, gowns wrappers, crafty hats, metal sheets, and rods. A range of other materials like shells and glass bottles of various shapes and sizes are equally used. Wood is used for poles and threads for tying, binding or for suspending the crow. Occasionally, grass is used. Sometimes these materials are used in assemblage to give the crow colour, texture and strength. One may be in doubt as to the reference of scarecrow as textile sculpture, but this shouldn't be because of its connection with fabric and textile constructions as the earlier definition of textile sculpture implied. Again, this is valid due to its three dimensional nature

which is organized in masses and volumes. Finally, its process or method of creation is akin to pure textile assemblage, wrapping, and building up of textile materials.

Sculptural Textile in Shrines

Textile sculpture in shrines are equally noticeable Shrines range from small portable objects to the entire building housing the sacred objects. The ancestral shrine objects are produced in conjunction with fabrics or textile based materials such as raffia, pieces of fabrics and other textile effects to produce images of ancestral representations. These sculptural objects may also come as wall hangings in form of tapestries or standing figures. It may also be an ancestral figure covered with cloth indicating reverence and honour. The elaborateness of fabric in a shrine does not reflects in any way the social power and prestige of that particular deity either as a family or community. Unlike the masquerade framework with elaborate and multiple layers of textiles, the shrine or its deity comes in thin layers of textiles. However, the shrine sculptural textiles are mainly the adornments used mostly for decorative and utilitarian purposes. Woven sacred fabrics used by diviners are usually hung on the walls of the shrine serving both decorative and religious purposes. Others may be a combination of woven fabrics and gourds or pots with feathers, fibers and colours got from ritual sacrifice of animals. These objects may either be hung on the walls or placed in a strategic point in the entire shrine house.

Sculptural textiles can also be seen or celebrated in prestigious apparels during social events and festivals. The complete chieftaincy regalia can also be grouped under textile sculpture. This apparels declare a conspicuously visible and audible accumulation of ornaments. It is an additive type of textile sculpture whereby an accumulation of royal garments and beaded necklaces is demonstrated (see plate 11). In this a aspect of textile sculpture, an abundance of clothing, painting, hairdressing and jewelry is celebrated.

Functions Of Igbo Textile Sculpture

Igbo textile sculpture has been identified in masks and masquerades, scarecrows, shrine objects and houses and prestigious apparels and they have gone a long way to depict numerous functions in Igbo communal existence. Function refers to the purpose of creating a particular sculptural representation as in textile sculpture and the role such piece performs in the society, in other words, the role of the work of art and the motivation that led to its creation. On this note, the Igbo textile sculpture is spearheaded by masking costume which results to masking tradition, therefore, its function can never be accomplished in isolation without the mention of masquerades and their various activities in the society.

This sculptural works in textile are created to be used during festivals. When they are used in costumes as mask spirits, the maskers are considered or regarded as the returning fathers, or he incarnate dead who watch over the living and are concerned with the abundant harvest and general prosperity of the people especially during agricultural festivals. Also, such costumes are worn for ritual feast to sanctify the land of an abominable deed. Again, these costumes were worn during the periodic festivals, one of which is “Mmanwu” festival at which time the ancestors are honoured and homage paid to the deities and the ancestral spirits. 'Mmanwu festival is a common entertainment event involving everyone in the society. It is a traditional as well as cultural event that embraces all sector of the society. It is a periodic festival that comes up yearly for most Igbo community. This festival is a moment of reaffirmation of the community's royalty not

royalty not only to the deity but also to the traditional ruler. It is a period of exchange of gifts and showing significant care to the people as they take up their roles in the social, and political lives of the people. It is also the period when maskers of different forms, and character come to the community social square to entertain the entire village. Igbo masks, of wood or fabric, are employed in a variety of dramas: social satires, sacred rituals (for ancestors and invocation of the gods), initiation, second burials, and public festivals—which now include Christmas and Independence Day.

Furthermore, this sculptural textile of mask or masquerade helps to enforce social norms due to their unquestionable authority. They give a sense of beauty and become spectacles to behold during dancing performances and this creates some sort of excitement among spectators that always await the appearance of these mask spirits with deep interest and anxiety. People assemble to admire the dances of the masquerade, its gesticulations, magic and artistry. The art form is a reminder to the people of the past achievements and failures of the dead, leaving room for improvement or amendments by the living. According to Mmanwu festival address of 1988 argues that the masquerade rather exists to remind the living of the past glories and perhaps the spoils of their ancestors (Mmanwu festival catalogue, 1988).

On the other hand, the scarecrow and certain shrine objects of textile based materials which were part of earlier Igbo textile sculpture were used mainly for protection. The main function of the scarecrow in the farm or any other place is to create an atmosphere of safety and good security. Scarecrows frighten rows and other birds away from crops. They are sometimes used as a warning signals or limitation of freedom to people, thereby checking trespassers. The shrine objects are used as the intermediaries between the gods, ancestors and the living. It is on this objects that sacrifices and rituals are made for cleansing of the land to to alleviate diseases and for some assurance of survival and prosperity as to wealth and fertility. These objects acts as representations of the gods, ancestors and the spirit of the land. Most of these objects or works of art serve as abode for the ancestral spirits of the land, examples of which are masks and masking costume and some shrine objects. Other figures often serve as symbols of the ancestral presence or generic representation of him to which the rites are directed. These textile works also help to maintain social and political status (the igwe's regalia, the Ozo costume etc , Plate 3,) and direct or monitor the norms and traditions of the community. Costume apparel gives a sense of prosperity and of secure self-esteem. Most importantly they serve as decorative items anywhere they are found. Numerous functions are assigned to these art forms, but it is important to note that every figure and mask and all other ceremonial objects have their particular functions without which the desires responsible for motivating art forms could not have been satisfied.

Conclusion

Textiles has always been a two dimensional work but the Igbo's explorative and creative mind has lifted it to three dimensional through the various uses for communal and personal aggrandizement. In this way, textile no-longer limits its boundaries as two dimensional arts but rather has spread out to other directions through their uses in masks and masking tradition, scarecrow, ritual objects and as body decoration to accord it a three dimensional stance as seen in chieftaincy regalia. This study has established that Igbo textile sculpture is dependent on their philosophy The nature of their belief and world - view was the force behind the creation of these monumental work of textiles which serve mainly utilitarian purposes rather than decorative. This study has revealed that the long

existing masking costumes scarecrows, ritual or shrine objects, and prestigious apparels are all part of textile sculptures found within the Igbo domain. They are pure and unadulterated.

In the traditional society, these sculptural edifices are used for entertainment, not just for cultural events, they likewise portray the Igbo world – view in a socio-cultural perspective during the annual celebrations.



Plate 1: Ijele Masquerade showing network of fabric conglomeration.



Plate 2: Conglomeration of Fabric Sculpture in Masquerade Display.



Plate 3: Festive Regalia

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Plate 4: Ogolo Masquerade



Plate 5: Ezzamgbo Mask (Leather)



Plate 6: "Mgbedike" Masquerade



Plate 7: Conglomeration of Colourful Textiles in Sculptural Form (Agboho mmo)



Plate 7: Wonder Masquerade



Plate 8: Scarecrow Made from Shirt & Guard



Plate 9: Scarecrow made from fabrics sculpture

